



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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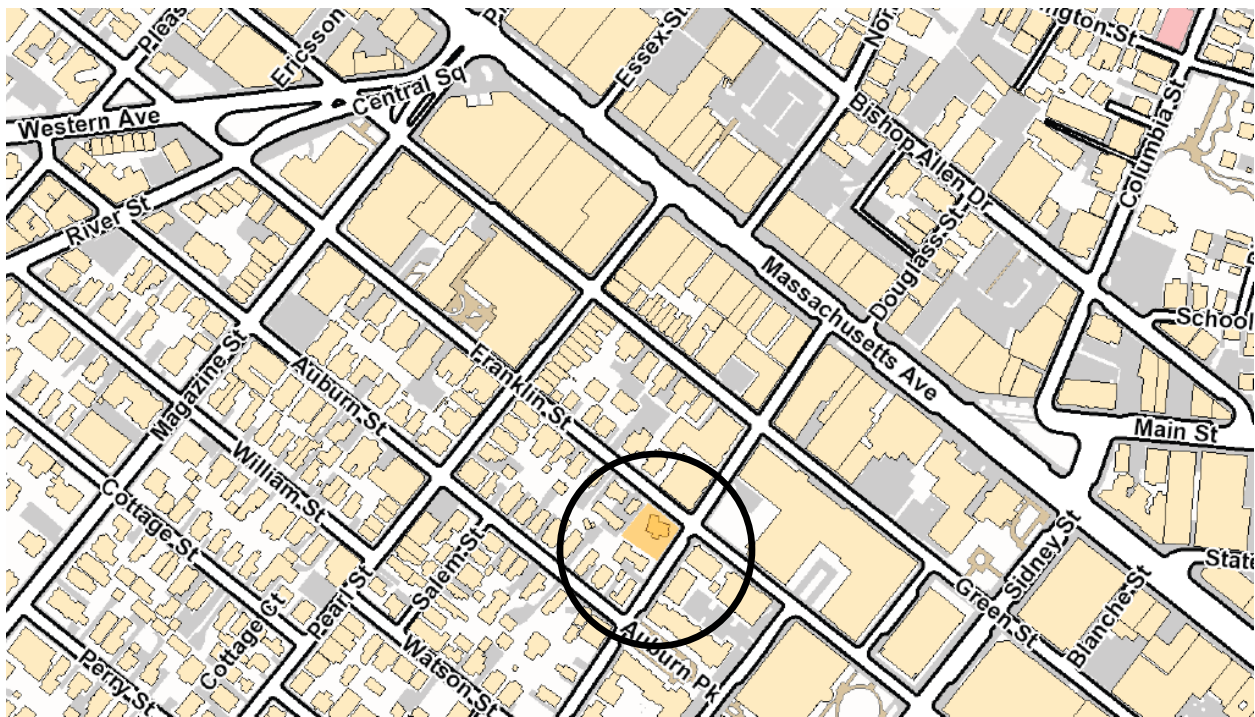
Date: October 26, 2012

To: Members and Alternates of the Cambridge Historical Commission

From: Sarah Burks, Preservation Planner
Photos by Charles Sullivan

Re: Fence at 37 Brookline Street

Peter Valentine of 37 Brookline Street contacted the Executive Director in August 2012 to request that the Commission consider designating the fence around two sides of his property as a landmark. After a discussion with Mr. Valentine about the nature of landmark designation the director agreed to his request and scheduled a hearing for November 1, 2012.



37 Brookline Street

Cambridge GIS

Description

The property at 37 Brookline Street consists of a lot containing 6,582 square feet with 78' of frontage on Brookline Street and 80' on Franklin. It contains a three-decker constructed in 1907 that was moved to this site in 1991 and placed at an angle relative to the adjoining streets. The site is enclosed on two sides by a board fence that is approximately 6' high



37 Brookline Street; fence in purple

Cambridge Assessing Department, 2010



37 Brookline Street, October 2012

CHC photo

Mr. Valentine's fence is approximately 6' tall and is colorfully painted on both sides. The sides of the fence facing Brookline and Franklin streets (approximately 155 linear feet) serve as a 930 square foot canvas for Mr. Valentine's art, poetry and philosophy. The title of this mural is *Moose & Grizzly Bears' Ville*. Unlike most murals, this art piece continues to evolve and change as the artist's inspiration requires. There are cut-outs in the fence where the viewer can gain a view of the yard and house. In addition to the painted figures and sayings, there are several three-dimensional objects attached to the fence in a manner of sculptural assemblage.



Brookline Street frontage, 37 Brookline Street

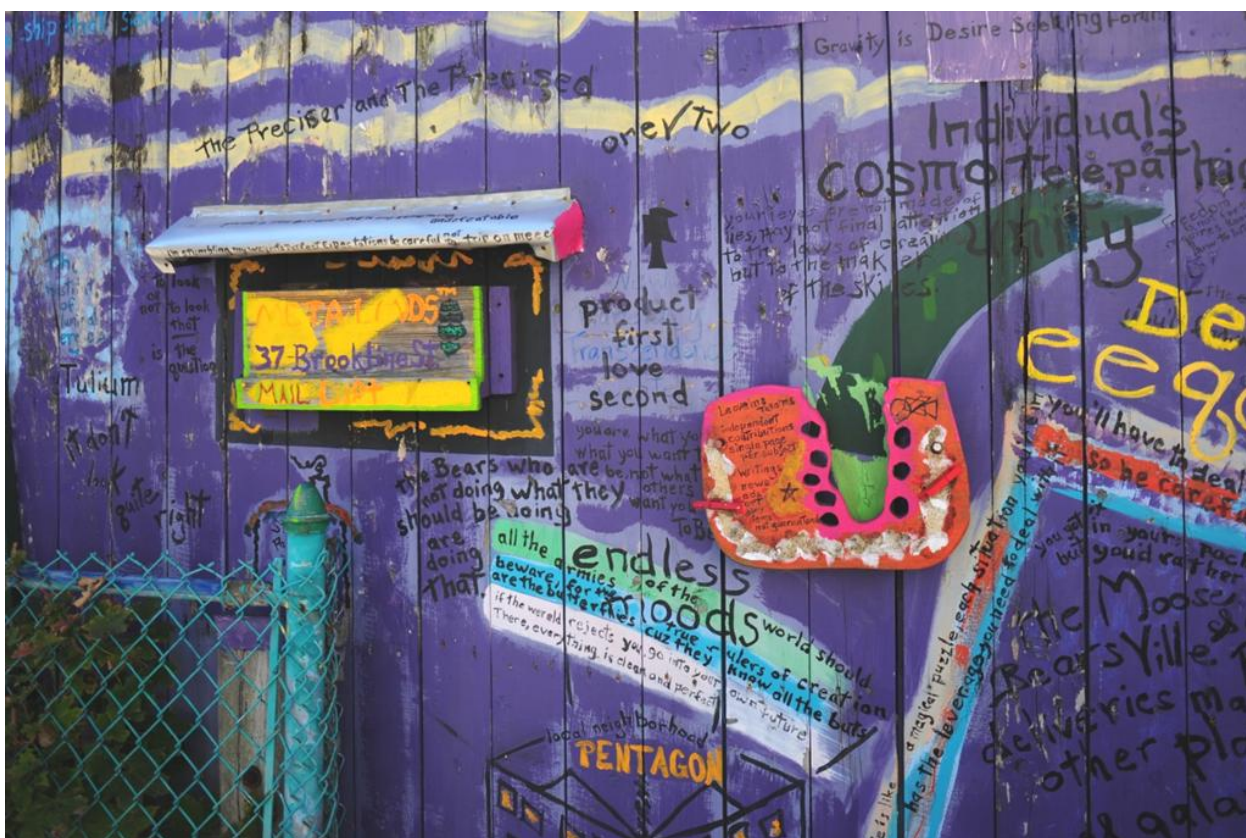
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Franklin Street frontage, 37 Brookline Street

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Landmarks are enacted by the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission. The Commission commences a landmark designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of ten registered voters. The Commission may decline to accept petitions that do not meet the criteria for landmark designation.

any property within the city being or containing a place, structure, feature, or object which it determines to be either (1) importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic, or social history of the City or the Commonwealth or (2) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures...

(2.78.180.A)

preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge

and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas, or structures; and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the city a more desirable place in which to live and work. (2.78.140)

Relationship to Criteria

Mr. Valentine's letter requesting historical designation constitutes the artist's statement,

"To give historical value to something as well as other interests, gives it protection status. What should be protected is that which protects and enhances life. My creative work protects and encourages humane existence, against that which degrades life into savagery, dog eat dog existence...

1. ...There has never been anything like it in Cambridge since it's beginning.
2. It gives people, just normally walking down a street, unexpected great joy, wonder, insight and peacefulness. Is making drab, routine normal life delightful to you or is history strictly related to buildings, war and politics?
3. No other fence in Cambridge does that. Or there is some evidence, no other fence in the world does that. For it is not a personal political rant. But insight into how the magicke of the viewers' own personal life can be ignited...

...To conclude I believe the fence should have historical protection status as a work which stands for humane existence against the forces of brutality. Something Cambridge should be proud of."

Peter Zak Valentine is a regular attendee at Cambridge City Council meetings, often weighing in on neighborhood issues or offering advice to the city government and the community at large. The Cambridge Street List indicates that he was born in 1942 and lists his occupation as an instructor. He offers classes in Electromagnetic Martial Arts (EMMA), a mental and physical self-defense technique he developed to protect oneself from a variety of threats.

Mr. Valentine emerged victorious from a multi-year battle against eviction from his apartment in one of several buildings on Blanche Street owned by M.I.T., which significantly delayed M.I.T.'s development of the hotel and supermarket at University Park. To settle this controversy, M.I.T. moved the three-decker from 55 Blanche Street to 37 Brookline Street in 1991 and deeded it to Mr. Valentine. Previously at that site was a 2½-story double house built ca. 1807 that was remodeled and enlarged into a six unit three-decker in 1914 and then demolished in 1968.

Mr. Valentine's fence attracts many curious visitors. Cambridge Community Television (CCTV) made a video about the fence in 2008. This short documentary can be viewed online at <http://www.cctvcambridge.org/moosewall>. A number of letters have been received from neighbors and friends in favor of protecting the fence, though the staff is unaware of any imminent threat to it. Its fate would be uncertain at some point in the future when the property changes hands.

Only one fence in Cambridge has been designated a landmark. The mid-nineteenth century granite gates and cast-iron fence at the Mt. Auburn Street entrance to Mount Auburn Cemetery were designated a landmark in 1982 following the removal of other portions of the fence and replacement with less expensive chain link fencing.

Staff Recommendation

The landmark and neighborhood conservation district ordinance, Ch. 2.78, Art. III, explicitly excludes paint color from the jurisdiction of the Historical Commission. Landmark designation would not, then, protect the painted art on the fence, but would only protect the wood fabric of the fence itself. Further, landmark status would not prevent the replacement of the wood components in kind. Landmark designation would require that Mr. Valentine request permission for changes to the height, openings, location, additions (assemblages) or materials of the fence. It could be difficult for the Historical Commission to determine the appropriateness of certain changes and the process might restrict the artist's creative expression.

Though perhaps a significant example of contemporary folk art and clearly associated with an living individual well-known in Cambridge, it is difficult to clearly state the fence's 'association with historical persons or events' or to describe it as 'historically or architecturally significant for its associations with a famous architect or builder,' as required by the ordinance. The staff believes that landmark designation is not the best tool to protect the fence or recognize its artistic contribution to Cambridge.

The staff recommends exploring other options to recognize the creativity, personal expression, and public engagement exhibited by Mr. Valentine's fence. Such options might include the installation of a descriptive or honorific marker, a City Council resolution, inclusion of the site on a map of art on view to the public, or possibly some association with the recent designation of Central Square as a Cultural District, or to local festivals such as Cambridgeport History Day, Cambridge Discovery Days, the River Festival, or the Central Square World's Fair.

cc: Peter Valentine



Brookline Street cutout, 37 Brookline Street

CHC photo